

Over the Border

A Tale of the Days of Charles I,
by Robert T. Barr

(Copyright, 1933, by Robert Barr.)
CHAPTER XIV.
Trapped.

IT WAS a pair no less joyous than beautiful that rode forth from York next morning, and journeyed for two days toward the south without care or hindrance. The girl was elated with her first intoxicating taste of power; the supreme power of a beautiful woman over a strong, determined man. She had shorn him of his fixed intentions as Deborah had shorn Samson of his locks. As the simile occurred to her, her joy in the day was clouded. She glanced sideways at her yellow-haired Samson, riding so gracefully on his splendid horse.

He turned and saw the sudden gloom on her brow. He brought his horse close beside hers, reached out and touched her hand gently.

"Dear heart, do not grieve," he said, tenderly. "I pledge my faith your brother is better already. Would I had thought of it in time, and there might have been a horseman traveling all night to York bringing you later tidings of him, but I am ever stupid in my treatment of you."

The girl's eyes filled. A helpless rage at the part assigned to her filled her heart with bitterness and brought the tears. It was only by dint of repeating to herself what Cromwell had said to her brother, and by persuading her mind to hold fast the knowledge that, without her fulfillment of Cromwell's orders Armstrong would die as a spy, that she could prevail upon herself not to stop her horse and tell him all.

It comforted her to note that Armstrong spoke not lovingly of the king, and characterized the whole race of the Stuarts as fair and false. Whatever motive had sent him on his dangerous mission, she observed, it was neither love for the king nor loyalty toward his cause.

Thus reflecting, she did not notice that they were drawing near Northampton, until suddenly the trampling of a squadron of horsemen came to their ears from behind them.

Armstrong suggested that it would be well to draw into the hedge while the troopers passed, and this they did. The Scot sat easily on his horse, watching the somewhat imposing oncoming, the breastplates of the men scintillating in the declining sun, which shone full upon them.

Suddenly he straightened out, and, unconsciously, perhaps, his hand grasped that of the girl.

"Have you ever seen Cromwell?" he asked.

"No."

"That is he at the head of the cavalry." She drew away her hand, and sat there scarcely breathing, fearful of the approaching encounter, which could not be avoided now.

If Armstrong were equally perturbed he showed no sign of it, and a quick admiration for his calmness surged through her as she looked at him.

But her eyes turned instinctively again to the leader of the troops. There was something masterful in his very bulk; he seemed a massive man on his huge horse; power personified was horse and man. His unblinking eye faced the sun like an eagle's, and he came stolidly past them, looking neither to the right nor the left. The firm face was as inscrutable and as ruthless as that of the Sphinx.

Four and four came the men behind him, some old, but erect, the majority middle-aged, all cast in the same mold as their leader. They sat like him. Polished steel on head and front, but nothing ornamental in their outfitting. No drums, no flags, no trumpets; a shining yellow bugle at the hip of the foremost, that was all. Everything for use, nothing for display. Clanking past they came, four and four, four and four, in seeming endless procession, weapons and chains at the horses' bits jingling the only music of their march. Not a word was spoken, not a glance to one side or the other. At last the final four went by, and Frances drew a breath of relief that a menace were past and done with.

"Do you think he saw us?" she whispered, not yet daring to speak aloud, a precaution rather absurd, for she might have shouted while they were within arm's length of her and she would not have been heard in the trampling of the horses.

"Saw us?" echoed Armstrong. "Yes, every thread of our garments. What a man! God of war, how I should like to fight him!"

"I thought you admired him."

"So I do, more than any other on earth. If I had seen him before I doubt if I had been here."

"I understood you to say you met him at Corbilton."

"Met him, yes, by dim candle light, smooth and courteous. But I never really saw him until now. You cannot rightly judge a man—a fighter, that is—until you have looked at him on horseback. That man knows my business. For the first time since I set out I doubt my success."

"Will you turn back?" she asked, her voice quivering.

"Oh, no. I'm his Roland. If we do not

cross swords we'll run a race, and may the best man win. But I feel strangely uncomfortable about the neck and I think of my ancestor Johnnie and the Scottish king."

He raised his chin and moved his head from side to side, as if the rope already throttled him. Then he laughed and she gazed at him in fascinated terror, wondering he could jest on a subject so gruesome.

"That man is likely to defeat me," he continued. "His plans are all laid, and already I feel the coils tightening around me. I am satisfied he knows every move I have made since I left him. The unseen spy is on my track, and, by my sword, I'd rather circumvent him than rule the kingdom."

Of me or my plans you know nothing, and I was with you merely because I happened to be traveling this way, and had brought your wounded brother to his home. And here is a great warning to us all. Happy is the person who can abide by the truth; who has no secret designs to conceal. My lady, I envy you."

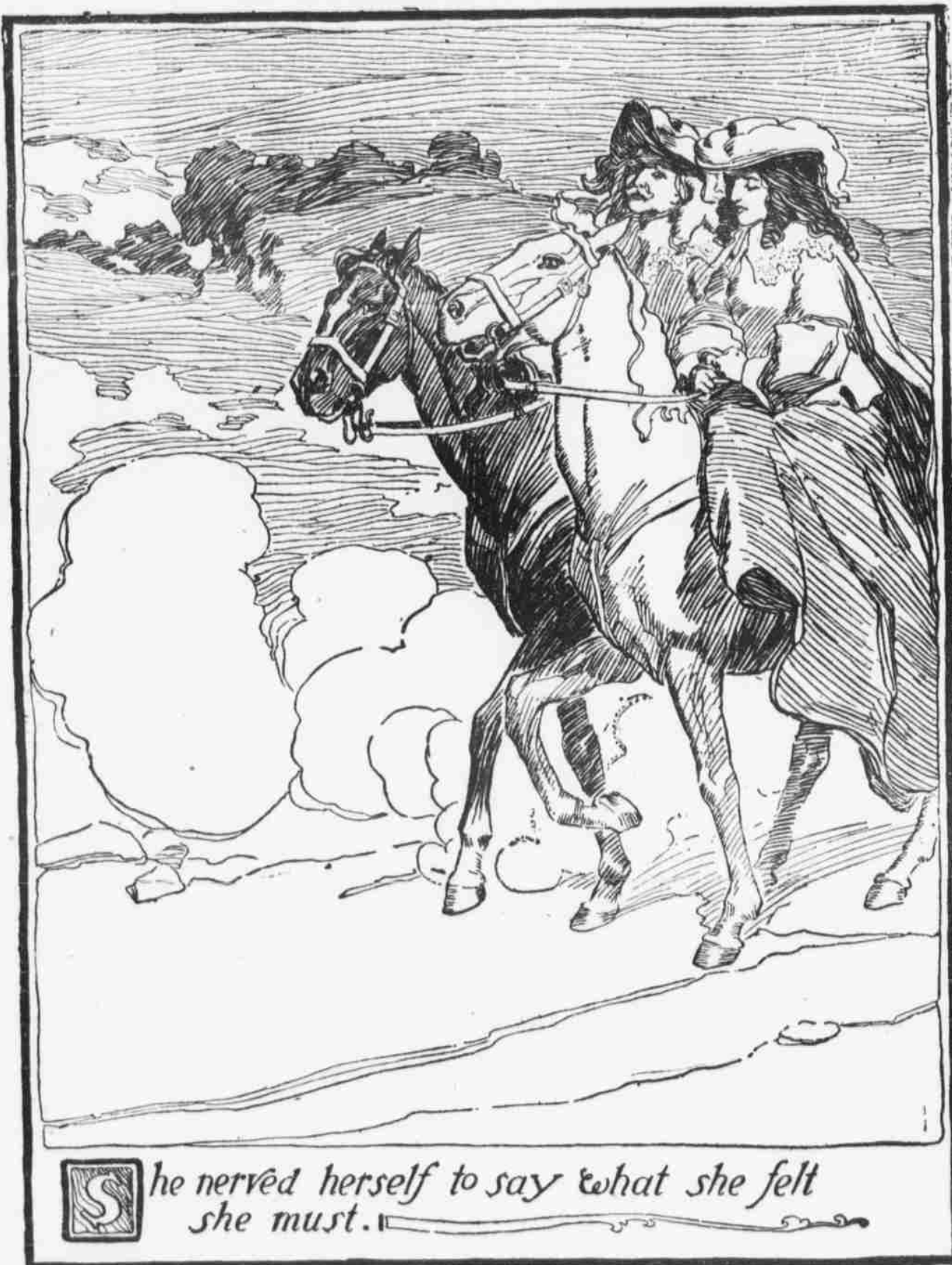
Frances made no reply, but sat there bending her eyes on the ground. There could be no doubt that his new resolve was the best move in the circumstances, and she was not in a position to inform him that his night march was unnecessary, and that he would be wise to husband his horse's power until he left Ox-

south were two others. As Armstrong and his companion continued west, the four troopers came out of their concealment and followed them.

"By St. Andrew, trapped! I'm trapped as completely as ever was Englishman in Tarras Moss!" muttered Armstrong.

CHAPTER XV.
Affection.

The four troopers allowed the distance between themselves and the forward party neither to increase nor diminish until darkness set in, when they closed up, but said nothing. There was no further conversation between Frances and the young



"Well, what's yer wits? Now's the time ye need them, my lad. In the first place I dare not go through Northampton, that's clear."

"Why?"

"In my soul, I'm certain a crisis awaits me there. I'll be nabbed in Northampton. Then the question, 'Why did you refuse a pass to Oxford?'"

"Did he offer you one?"

"Yes. The next question will be, 'Why are you south of the limit set by yourself, traveling to Oxford on another's pass?' To that query there's no answer. I'm a self-convicted spy, and then the scaffold, according to all the rules of war."

"If Cromwell is as crafty as you seem to believe, it is likely he wishes you to reach Oxford. Unless that was the case, why should he have offered you the pass?"

"My lass, there are several sides to this problem, and what you say has the stamp of probability on it. Nevertheless, I'll over-see his arrangements. I am the only one of us three who cannot give good excuses for being in these parts. Here is the pass which protects you and John," he said, giving her the document. "You and he will to Oxford at your leisure. I shall gallop across country, will evade the parliamentary lines as best I may, and will be in Oxford tomorrow morning. That will throw Old Noll a day out of his count."

"Then you leave me to meet Cromwell alone?"

"You have no need to fear the meeting. Your plea is perfect. Your brother was wounded and you have undertaken his task.

lord, for then would come his time of need.

"Well, let us get on," he cried. "I'll take the first by-road south!"

Cautious old John, with his limping horse, had gone forward while they stood talking together, and now they cantered to overtake him. Frances was glad of the cessation of conversation, that she might have opportunity of meditating on some argument that would retain him by her side. If he left her, she was resolved to seek out Cromwell at Northampton, tell him of her brother's disaster and explain her own effort to make good his absence. When Cromwell was convinced that both her brother and herself had faithfully endeavored to carry out the commander's wishes, he might then heed her pleading that sentence be annulled, or at least suspended until the boy had another chance of proving his loyalty to his party. She thought she should succeed in this appeal for mercy as she was sure Cromwell himself must know her brother was not a traitor. Her meditations were interrupted by Armstrong suddenly drawing in his horse and standing up in his stirrups. She also stopped and looked inquiringly at him. A high hedge bordered the road and he was endeavoring to peer beyond it.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I thought I caught a glint of a helmet over yonder."

They went on at a walk and shortly after passed a road that crossed their own. Up this cross-road to the north two troopers sat on their horses; down the road to the

man. He held himself erect, and, beyond the first exclamation, gave no intimation that he was disturbed by the prospect before him. She was victim to the most profound dejection, and was relieved when the gathering gloom allowed her pent-up tears to fall unseen. The universal silence made the situation the more impressive. The sun had gone down in a bank of cloud which now overspread the heavens, threatening a storm and obscuring the moon.

At last the lights of Northampton glimmered ahead, and shortly after a guard in front summoned them to stand. The troopers behind them also stood, but took no part in what followed. An officer examined their pass by the light of a lantern, but did not return it to them. His words seemed reassuring enough.

"You are stopping the night at Northampton?"

"Yes," replied Armstrong, although the pass had been given up by Frances, and the officer's inquiry was addressed to her.

"Have you any particular lodging in view?"

"No."

"You may meet trouble in finding a suitable abiding place," said the officer, "more especially for the lady. Northampton is little better than a barracks at the moment. I will take you to the Red Lion."

And saying this, but without waiting for any reply, he led the way with the swinging lantern. The Red Lion proved a much less attractive hostelry than the hospitable Angel at Grantham. It seemed